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Scale How, Ambleside, UK, 2009

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## RUSKIN: AN EARLY NOTE.

BY LAURENCE SAUNDERS.

THE greatest exponent of the didactic value of art of all time to men of all times was the unconscious creator of a striking proof of the truth of his own teaching, and an example of the power innate in the true artist to convey the lessons of Nature through the medium of his art. When John Ruskin was eight years old he wrote the following lines (which he quotes in the *Queen of the Air*):—

"Papa, how pretty those icicles are,  
That are seen so near, that are seen so far;  
Those dropping waters that come from the rocks  
And many a hole, like the haunt of a fox.  
That silvery stream that runs babbling along,  
Making a murmuring, dancing song.  
Those trees that stand waving upon the rock's side,  
And men, that, like spectres, among them glide.  
And waterfalls that are heard from afar,  
And come in sight when very near.  
And the water-wheel that turns slowly round,  
Grinding the corn that—requires to be ground,  
And mountains at a distance seen,  
And rivers winding through the plain.  
And quarries with their craggy stones,  
And the wind among them moans."

"Very clever for a child of eight!" do we say? "Really quite pretty!" And so, in our grown-up wisdom, we pass on to something more worthy of our mature appreciation. Yet there is that in these simple, childish lines which will repay a few moments' attention, and possibly teach us something worth our while to learn. They may or may not show genius; that may safely be left to opinion, but they certainly do show something better (may we say?), for it is possible for us of common clay to share it—a realisation of the beauty of nature. But, you say, is not that the inspiration of almost all poetry? And have we not poets and poetasters, rhymers and rhymesters, who have said far more beautiful and thought-inspiring things about the waterfalls, the streams, the trees and the rocks, than we find in these lines? True indeed,

yet if we look beneath the surface we may obtain a glimpse into a portion of Nature's kingdom which, in spite of its marvellous beauty, we only too often pass by with the scantiest interest—the heart of a child.

Whatever we become in after years; whatever may be the secretiveness of our minds, or the sensitiveness of our natures to ridicule and indifference, there has been a period in our lives when we desired sympathy. Not necessarily the compassion of another for our sorrows and trials only, but the desire that another should share in a new-found emotion, of joy, of surprise, of admiration. We may have learned through sad experience to look in vain to the majority of our fellows for response to those sentiments that we cherish in our inmost hearts, and have resigned ourselves to a snail-like attitude, of our own natures forming the hard shell in which we hide their sensitive tissues. Or we may perhaps have bravely sought—and found, here and there—a heart with answering, vibrating chord. But when we see in a child the fond joy with which it calls to its parent to share its wonder at a new discovery, or to be sorry with it for some unaccustomed trial, we recognise a phase which we ourselves have passed through, the longing for another mind to respond actively to our own sensations. And the more capable we are of feeling with others the more do we long that others shall feel with us.

Now the first word in these verses—the dedication, as it were—tells of the one dominant chord, sympathy, in the heart of the child who wrote them. He had suddenly perceived the beauty and wonder of the icicles, the silvery stream, the trees;—he calls his father to wonder with him. His joy is not complete without another to share it. The effect of these things upon his mind is too great and too far-reaching to satisfy his large, little heart, without the companionship of another's wonder. Herein is the marvel of the thing, that the very largeness of the heart makes a joy entering it seem solitary unless it be companioned by that of another. In after years his deep and untiring sympathy proved the motive power of John Ruskin's whole life, a power in which his every action and thought lived and moved and had its being. It was more than compassion for suffering; it was

the divine gift of being able to feel *with*, not only *for*, all living creatures. He could place himself among the worshippers of Athena in ancient Greece and regard her with their eyes, perceiving how and why and with what effect they invested her with various powers, looked upon her as the type of different virtues, as controlling certain agencies. With an equally sympathetic intuition could he see the work of old Italian painters and architects with their eyes, or talk to the cadets at Woolwich about the things which were vital to their interests and nearest to their hearts; and again, discourse to an assembly of working men as one of themselves.

But if sympathy finds its exercise in love, it takes its origin in purity. It was the innocence of Ruskin's childish, perceptive mind that made him able to draw that little word picture in Glen Farg during his ninth year, and it was the unsullied purity of his every thought that gave him to hear, years afterwards, the voice of Nature speaking to his soul from the majestic presence of the Alps, and that enabled him to turn to his fellow-men and tell such as would hearken of the beauty of Nature's presence, and of her still, small—but insistent—voice, whether heard in the forecourt of her unadorned palaces or through the medium of "right" art.

We can imagine nothing foreshadowed in these lines that is out of keeping with the character of Ruskin as it shewed itself in later years. Through each successive line we find such a forceful imagery, such a keen observation and such an apt faculty of association that we have at once a clue to the tendency of the child's mind to study Nature as the Ideal, and to take deeply into his own heart the lessons she would teach. Throughout his long life of strenuous—supremely courageous—work, a life clouded by frequent and far-reaching disappointments, embittered by occasional failure (but failure of the type that is often nobler than success), he never lost the sense of dependence upon, and kinship with, Nature. And above all he never ceased to insist upon the paramount importance, in himself and in others, of being prepared to receive with pure heart and mind the messages that Nature will speak to the listening ear. So he was able to say, many years afterwards, in connection with a drawing by Turner of the Lake of Geneva, "I dare to say it, that, because through

all my life I have desired good, and not evil; because I have been kind to many; have wished to be kind to all; have wilfully injured none, and because I have loved much, and not selfishly, therefore the morning light is yet visible to me on those hills, and you, who read, may trust my thought and word in such work as I have to do for you; and you will be glad afterwards that you have trusted them."

And if it was the purity and unselfishness of his own life that showed him the beauty of truth in Turner's drawing, how much more did it enable him to see in every aspect of Nature herself that which must be for ever hidden from the unthoughtful and the unworthy.

Concerning the faculty of expression, and the power of illustration shown in these lines it is unnecessary to speak. Criticism would be obviously impossible, for by what standard of literary merit are we to judge the compositions of a child of eight? There is one line, however, which sets our fancy wandering delightfully. He has come to

"The water-wheel that turns slowly round,  
Grinding the corn that—"

when there is apparently a pause in his musings. How is he to finish the line? (We can see the little fellow looking perplexedly at the ponderous wheel, seeking inspiration at this critical moment). What rhymes with "round"? "Grinding the corn." Why, "ground," of course—the very thing! Down it goes,

"Requires to be ground—"

(Political economy of the future, as he aptly suggests when quoting the lines in 1869), and so he sails peacefully on to the end.

But if we look beneath the surface there are lessons of deep ethical import to us. It is not so much the precocity of his artistic apprehension that moves our admiration, as the foreshadowing of those nobler characteristics of sympathy, love of Nature and poetic appreciation of the beautiful. How often are these hidden in a child's mind, but kept dormant until they atrophy from very inaction and the lack of means to express themselves, having no responsive heart to which they may make themselves known. There are few children indeed in whom the power of sympathy is not inherent, but

many in whom it is choked and stifled by the lack of answering power among those with whom they come in contact. We too often fail to recognise the latent potentialities in their minds; too often also, in our world-hardened wisdom do we fail to hear the simple but eternal truths that those undeveloped lips can tell us. We forget that the innocence of inexperience is but one degree less beautiful than innocence with knowledge; and so we pass on, never thinking that we have left unopened a casket of precious gems, which, though perhaps uncut and unpolished, are not on that account of less intrinsic value. Emerson spoke truly when he said, "The fountain of beauty is the heart"; nor is it alone the heart of the man or woman who knows the world with its bitter and sweet, it may be that of the child whose springs of affection and appreciation are as yet clear from the taint of the world's wisdom.

"The fountain of beauty is the heart," and how clear must that fountain be when the heart can say, in a noble yet humble self-consciousness, "I have loved much, and not selfishly." Truly as we read this little poem (and no *poem* ever deserved the name better), we see beneath its surface that which tells of a power of sympathy and unselfish love latent in a heart that in after years proved to all the world the worth of its purity and the grandeur of its courage.

## MOTHERS' EDUCATIONAL COURSE.

BY MRS. WENTWORTH.

### QUESTION.

WOULD you condemn or justify David's conduct with regard to (a) Saul, (b) Achish, (c) Shimei? Treat the subject as a lesson for children.

### ANSWER.

In speaking to children on David's life, they must be reminded that his times were times of savagery and rudeness, when human life was not respected as it is now and when kings had almost absolute power to do as they liked. In the instances of David's conduct in the matter of Saul and Achish he was a hunted man with everyone's hand against him, and as we see in some of his Psalms written at that time, he was often tempted to despair. In his conduct towards Saul we must admire his forbearance on more than one occasion, and when his enemy was delivered into his hand he forebore to touch the Lord's anointed, though he would have acted according to the custom of his time and according to the advice given him in killing him. In the matter of Achish, his feigning to be mad showed a want of trust in God and he descended to what we should call "a low trick" in order to escape, and this strikes us all the more when we read his Psalms of absolute trust in God's power to help him and in his own entire dependence on it; but here again we must think of the desperate straits he was in and the temptation to think he was forsaken. In the case of Shimei we again see the absence of a revengeful spirit such as we might have expected in those times.

### QUESTION.

Show that Solomon represents some aspects of 19th century thought. Write such a study of his character as you would bring before schoolboys—say in vacation.

### ANSWER.

Perhaps he represents 19th century characteristics in placing intellect and ability above morality, and an easy toleration